

Welcome Home by TheComplex

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Summary: She stood in front of the portal, jaw set and gaze determined. Mike would have to wait. The Snowball would have to wait. Home would have to wait. / A season 2 AU in which Eleven does not escape the Upside Down. / Rated for violence/dark themes

1. Welcome to the Black Parade

Notes and trigger warning:

I wrote this before Season 2 came out. But I liked it so much that I didn't want to waste it! So I re-wrote it with S2 in mind.

This is a season 2 AU in which Eleven did not escape the Upside Down right away (something that always bothered me).

Referenced child abuse in this chapter.

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Chapter 1: Welcome to the Black Parade

She didn't expect to wake up again.

But when she did, everything was different. Cold, disoriented, and alone, she stumbled through the hallways of the school. She knew where she was, but not how to get back to where she needed to be. Her chest constricted, trapping her breaths in her lungs. She couldn't tell if it was the panic setting in, or her body rejected the toxic air of the Upside Down.

The Demogorgon. It had fought tooth and nail against her, but it had hurt her friends and this was ending *here*. It had no chance of escape as she pulled it apart piece by piece. It knew it was losing. As a last resort it had tried to flee, opening another portal to the shadow world with the last of its strength and retreating through. But her grasp was unyielding. And so she'd followed, collapsing moments after, as the last particles of the beast faded to nothingness around her. Her last thoughts had been of Mike.

Mike. She needed to find him. If only she could find her way back to him, everything would be better. She tried to focus on that and ignore the world tilting around her as she searched up, down, and around for any sign of a way out, growing more and more desperate and dizzy with each passing moment. All of her muscles ached,

protesting as she picked up her pace, fighting the exhaustion that threatened to pull her down to the floor again. This place leached her already drained energy reserves. Tears blurred her vision and streaked down her filthy face, but somehow she still caught it in her peripheral. The red glow, standing out stark in the dank, blue hues of the inverted world.

Her ticket out of here.

She crouched, hand shaking with anticipation and her heartbeat jumped into overdrive as her arm breached the membrane separating this world from hers. But she needed to fit more than her arm through. Breathing in, she silenced her frenzied mind. She stood, pushing the pain in her head and body aside just as Papa had taught her all those years ago, and locking it away. Summoning calm and focus, she lifted her hand.

The portal crumbled like sand beneath her powers.

When it was big enough, she let herself breath again, new tears streaking down her cheeks.

Mike. Mike. Mike. Mike. Mike. Mike.

Movement caught her eye. She didn't want to stop, didn't want to wait for *anything*. But she did. Sickly, black tendrils oozed across the walls and floor, inching towards the portal. They were just reaching the edges, latching on as if they were alive and...like acid, they ate away at the fabric separating the dimensions. Where moments earlier the hole seemed to close on its own, stitching itself back together, it now grew, slowly but surely.

She leaned closer, squinting in the dim light. The black stuff spread and pulsed. It seemed almost alive. A dull, sinking feeling settled in her stomach. A cautious finger rose towards the tendrils. As soon as her finger made contact with its surface a blinding, cold pain, like the electricity sticks the bad men used on her when she wasn't cooperative, shot through her and suddenly she was on the floor, gasping for breath. The pain was gone in an instant, but the image that had flashed through her mind lingered. Evil. A dark presence she didn't understand. She didn't know what it, what *he* was. But she'd

felt his intentions. His goal was clear. *Take. Kill.* An insatiable lust.

She rose shakily to her feet. It would be so easy to not think, to just step through that portal, to find Mike and warmth and *home*. But her feet carried her down the hallways, away from her escape. She needed to be sure. She just needed to be sure. Another, glowing spot came into view, this one much smaller. And then another, and another, and another. All small. But all there. In the school. Where Mike went to school *every day*. Her hands grew clammy and her breaths grew short as she approached the familiar double doors that led to outside the school. Unctuous vines held them closed but she easily used her powers to blow them apart, stepping out into the open. And stopped.

The world bled a glowing red.

Patches of light, varying in sizes and intensity, covered surfaces of the ground, structures, and trees as far as her eyes could see. They stood out stark against the darkness of the Upside Down. Glaring and undeniable. She fell to her knees, the air whooshing out of her lungs.

She had caused this.

Hawkins was in danger, the *world* was in danger because of her mistakes. But most importantly, Mike was in danger because of what she'd done.

She sobbed into her hands, covering her eyes from the sight in front of her. For one achingly wonderful moment she'd deluded herself in to thinking she'd ended it, that she could go home.

What a *fool* she'd been.

She'd forgotten Papa's words. *Good things are for good girls, Eleven. Bad things are for bad girls.* She moaned through her hiccups, biting down on the back of her hand hard enough to draw blood. The pain drew back her focus. She forced her breaths to even. *Good girls don't cry.* She clenched her jaw and rose from the ground with a new goal in mind.

She'd done this.

And now she was going to fix it.

She walked back through the doors, shutting them with a flick of her head, eyes fixed on the end of the hallway all the while, on the place where the red burned brightest. She stood in front of the tear, jaw set and gaze determined. Mike would have to wait. The Snowball would have to wait. Home would have to wait.

She lifted her hand, and the edges of the rip began to move together.

This was her home now.

2. Welcome to The Jungle

Trigger warning at end of chapter.

Chapter 2: Welcome to the Jungle

Hopper had known from the moment he'd set eyes on her, to keep his distance.

Because this girl, she could not stay.

He wasn't delusional. Despite how poorly the men at that lab had obviously treated her, there was no chance of a normal life for this kid. Though it wasn't her fault, but she was still clearly *dangerous*. It hadn't taken him long to put two and two together and realize she had opened the gate. She had let the monster out, she had powers beyond her ability to control, she was who these so called "bad men" were after, had *killed* to find.

But most importantly, she was their ticket to Will. If it came down to that, to a choice between the two, he would save Will. He'd *promised*.

So he ignored the way her shaved head, frightened eyes and pale skin made him remember Sara, wracked with pain he couldn't take away in her final days.

He didn't allow himself to be moved by her bravery as she offered herself up to find Will in the bath, though clearly petrified of what it entailed. Instead he used what he observed to formulate his own plan.

She will protect these kids, he realized, no matter what the cost.

He guarded his heart against the sight of her, trembling and exhausted in Joyce's arms, not able to lift herself from the water of the kiddie pool after giving everything she had for a boy she'd never met.

She's the reason he is gone he repeated to himself like a mantra.

Determinedly stone faced as he handed his flannel to the shaking girl, still damp and cold from her experience in the pool. She shivered more violently when she met his eyes and dropped her gaze down to the floor, as if somehow physically feeling his coldness towards her.

He didn't look back when they left those kids unprotected in the gym because he knew what would, what HAD to happen. She wasn't one of them. There was no time and no room in his plan for another kid. She needed to be a faceless pawn in the game at that moment and so, to him, that's exactly what she was. They were backed into a corner. He knew it, and on some level he thought she had to know it too.

Brenner leaned over the table, his collected demeanor slipping for the first time during their negotiations, a hungry glint peeking out from behind the collected mask as Jim divulged the whereabouts of the kids. Fighting through the whelming disgust, he focused on the impersonal information he had dredged up about her during his search for the Byers kid.

Runaway. Freak. She broke my arm. Weapon. Experiment. Killer.

He laid out specifics for the white-haired man opposite him. Manipulating the manipulator with the one ace they both knew he held. Brenner was desperate to get her back. She was their bargaining chip to Will and time was running out.

In that moment, she wasn't an abused little kid. She wasn't a child who needed someone to stand up for her. She wasn't a little girl who needed to be protected. He didn't know she would die that night (or seemingly so), but he certainly knew that it was a possibility. He also knew that Joyce would never agree to the plan if she knew the heavy cost of her son's safety. Which is exactly why he didn't tell her.

He was perfectly prepared to bear the inevitable, crushing guilt once this all was over and Will was safe. It was selfish, sure, but at least only he would suffer. That was until he'd learned she was still out there.

After waiting in the lobby for news about Will (incapable of walking into another hospital room since Sara's time spent there) he'd stepped into the frigid night air for a light when the car had pulled up. He

knew there was no avoiding it, so he didn't even try. He'd known there would be backlash from the events that had transpired that night, but hadn't at all expected the talk to go the direction that it did.

Brenner was dead and the school was a tomb. Too much had happened in the public eye and as soon as the DoD caught wind of the rumors that their investment was heavily involved, they'd launched an immediate and ongoing containment and investigation into the goings-on of the government sponsored facility, led by Doctor Sam Owens.

Brenner and his team had, it seemed, been over-zealous in their research, delving into subjects beyond their funding and covering up a great many aspects of their "research." All in all, it was a major debacle on their end, and it was just so typical that things would unfold this way, that it would take multiple tragedies for the government to stop and reevaluate their actions.

It was so damn typical. He would have found it funny if the collateral hadn't been so catastrophic.

They needed him. Somehow he had gone into an unexplored dimension and not only come out alive, but rescued a missing child from the depths as well. Somehow he knew how the gate had been created in the first place, managed to break into a secure, top-secret facility multiple times, taken control in an uncontrollable situation, and tracked down an escaped test subject when they'd searched for a week with no success.

But perhaps the most valuable asset he offered them was the fact that he was a trusted authority in the Hawkins community. If anyone could slake the panicked curiosity of the small town, it was the police chief they had grown up with.

They were practically begging for his help. And he didn't want to, he wanted nothing more than to walk out and try to forget that the safety of millions of people rested in the hands of these buffoons. The idea of helping to cover up everything that had happened when secrets and deceit were exactly what led to this situation in the first place was sickening to him, but he was a more realistic man than

that.

If he didn't step in, someone else would. Someone who didn't have the wellbeing of an obsolete town like Hawkins in mind. *Keep your friends close, and your enemies closer.* On top of that, he figured he knew too much to be ignored and it was either cooperate or be silenced.

So he'd agreed, with specific parameters that would have to be met. Number one, that Joyce and her family would be reimbursed for money spent and the personal turmoil experienced while the boy was missing. And then some. She'd completely refused it, of course, proclaiming in that spitfire way of hers that her silence couldn't be bought. Everyone would know what they had done to her boy. And she certainly had tried. The only reason she hadn't succeeding in blowing the tenuous cover Hop had helped build up was the fact that her main opponent was Jim himself, the man she shared all her plans with. She had no idea that her trust was being used against her, or that Jim lied through his teeth weekly, finding new and creative ways to get that money to her one way or another.

His second requirement was that no one else would get hurt. The moment they touched anyone under his jurisdiction was the moment he walked out the door.

Number three, unmitigated access to all classified information pertaining to the previous research of the facility. This had been the hardest term he had to negotiate, but he stuck to his guns, arguing he couldn't do his job unless he knew, fully, what he was dealing with. In the end, they found a compromise.

She grits her teeth and swipes the sharp rock across the back of her forearm again, drawing blood. The pain sends a jolt of adrenaline through her veins, waking her up, bringing back her focus.

At this point, it's the only thing keeping her going.

The pain in her head, the pain in her stomach, the pain in her bones she can't control, but this she can control. The wound gives her a more focused pain, dulls the others.

She has to...keep going.

Her friends are depending on her. And there is still so much to be done.

She's lost track of the days and she can't remember the last time she ate. It's always dim here, and the spores that infect the air make it even harder to see and force her to constantly use her powers keeping them out of breathing range. Much like the hazy atmosphere, her mind has begun to fog. Sometimes, she forgets her purpose here. Like now, she does what she has to do to remember.

She must continue.

He does not know she's here, doesn't even suspect it. She must make the most of that advantage while it lasts.

Trigger warning for self-harm.

Just a head's up, the rest of the story will primarily be Hopper's POV, with a heavy focus on his developing relationship with Eleven. El's perspective will be included in italics.

3. Welcome to My Life

Trigger warning at the end of this chapter.

Chapter 3: Welcome to My Life

A week into damage control, of sifting through detailed layouts of experiments, results, and predictions that made his stomach turn before he finds the boxes. Carefully labelled and divided into chronological order.

001, 002, 003, 004, 005, 006, 007, 008, 009, 010...*There.*

The largest box of all was the last one, filled with files and tapes marked Project 011. There were eleven years' worth of material, neatly and clinically organized in a timeline documenting her short life. It took him over a week, but he got through it all. He owed her that much. That, and he was a sucker for self-inflicted guilt trips.

Eyes dry and burning, Jim forced himself to watch every second of footage recorded. Within the first hour, he was stumbling out the door and heaving his lunch into a nearby waste bin because he couldn't make it to the bathroom in time.

It only got worse from there.

He had to fight not to look away as he watched a silent 4 year old girl sit unnaturally stiff and still as men in white uniforms buzzed her head, tossing large chunks of soft brown hair aside until there was nothing left but a fuzzy brown tuft. It dredged up unwanted memories of Sara, how they'd eventually been forced to shave her head. She'd howled the whole time, scared of the loud clippers. He and Diane had both been there with her the whole way through, comforting and encouraging. And they'd gone to get ice cream after.

This little girl wasn't even spared a second glance.

The first time her powers were recorded, she was 6 years old, swallowed up in a gown that was far too big for her and sitting in a

cold metal chair built for an adult. They wanted her to move a crayon across the table with her mind, and wouldn't let her leave her seat until her task was complete. The tape was edited down. He watched the timecode on the bottom of the screen jump from fifteen minutes, to 2 hours, to 4 hours, to 7 hours. He watched her whole body tense as she focused on the piece of colorful wax, putting everything she had into it until she shook and she reached up to wipe the sweat off her face. Again and again and again until she had to hold onto the table to keep herself upright, her breathing heaved and hitched, and tears of frustration ran down her face. She could leave any time she wanted, they kept telling her, if only she would be a good girl and do as she was told. Finally, finally, exhausted and shivering in a wet chair because they wouldn't let her up to use the bathroom, she made a final, herculean effort, the veins in her forehead popping out as she funneled the last of her energy into her task. The crayon shot across the table and dropped to the floor with a soft *plink* and Eleven immediately collapsed forward onto the table, the side of her head hitting the cold surface with a painful sound as her body gave out on her. Limp and forgotten, that's where she remained for the rest of the video as men in white coats patted their own backs and recorded information off of readouts.

More footage, most of it recordings of tests to see what triggered her abilities. They tried an array of methods, some harmless enough, laughable even; others were nausea inducing. Countless needles and test tubes, sensors, electro shocks, and deprivation tactics. Most of the time, Project 011 robotically followed orders with a sort of mechanical subservience more commonly attributed to a robot than a child. Her gaze was disconnected and blank as they poked and prodded. Sometimes she cried, if it hurt or she was afraid, but even then they were silent tears.

But sometimes, the worst of times, she fought back. This inevitably ended with orderlies dragging her through the door and off screen, the sound of her ragged howling ringing through the room and in his ears. The cameras didn't record where she was taken, but without fail the next recording showed her carrying out the same task without opposition, face blank again. He found the isolation room later, and put the pieces together himself.

One variable remained the same, through every tape. She looked terrified. The girl was devoid of all childish curiosity and happiness. At least from what was recorded. He thought back to the very small amount of time he'd spent with her. She was scared then, too. And yet, there had been compassion and bravery.

How did she even know what compassion was?

He grew more keenly aware of how they'd taken advantage of that selflessness. She was used for so long, could she even say no? Did she know how? The fact that she'd pushed her powers to the point of disintegrating in defense of those boys was all the proof he needed to answer that question. Even when it was seemingly her own choice, even when she'd suggested the bath in the first place, it was all wrong. She would, and had, given everything because it was the only thing she'd ever known. It made it all so much worse, realizing she was used to being manipulated and discarded for her abilities, that he was just one in a long line of abusers.

He downed his whiskey and injected the next tape.

Hopper watched as her abilities grew with age, and along with it, her defiance. He watched as they toed the line between science and playing God, and then crossed it without hesitation. He put his head in his hands as they pushed her further and further, knowing where this all inevitably led. They were dabbling in things they never should have even dreamed about, with Eleven as the catalyst. She was just a kid, totally unaware her abilities were about to bring a living hell to earth.

He lit another cigarette.

The last tape.

He watched as the room shook, the wall cracked, and the girl struggled and screamed noiselessly from within the tank.

Another cigarette.

The footage suddenly cut out, descending into gray static. He stared at the monotone screen.

A whole life summed up in rolls of film and paper sheets. Besides the sparse memories of those who had encountered her during her one week of liberty, it was all that was left of her, the only proof she had ever existed.

Making a split second decision, he grabbed all the boxes and took them home, smuggling them out in the back of his truck, not much caring what the consequences might be. He packed it all neatly away in the shed, not at all sure what he would do with them, but knowing he couldn't let them stay in that lab a moment longer.

He didn't sleep that night. Or much the rest of the week. Besides the months following Sara's death, he couldn't remember a darker time in his life than the week that followed. Drinking himself numb to hold the guilt at bay through the night (it never worked).

He was sitting alone in his dingy living room, wondering when the debilitating remorse might lessen a little, when every light in the room brightened, almost blindingly, and his TV blew up, unable to manage the overload. He stumbled out of his trailer and found the headlights of his cruiser shining just as brightly, despite the car being off for hours. After a short time, they dimmed, along with every other light in his trailer. Moments later, he was driving to the lab.

The place was in disarray. But he managed to yell his way into being escorted to Dr. Owens, who, unsurprisingly, was at the epicenter of the event that had led to the unnatural power surge. His stomach dropped to his feet as he stood in the lowest level of the facility, staring up at the vine and fungus covered wall. The tile was still covered in other-worldly gunk and goo, and yet all that stood behind was now a solid wall.

The gate. It was closed.

By some miracle, He hadn't found her.

It had taken weeks of careful planning and scouting and saving up her energy to close the Gate. She managed to slip into His territory while He was distracted.

It was the hardest thing she'd ever attempted with her powers. She

pictured her friends, the ones who had shown her kindness for the first time in her life, and not the kind that required something in return, but a kindness that was free. It was the most wonderful thing she could remember.

She had to protect it.

With that at the forefront of her mind, she poured everything she had into stitching that gateway closed, thread by thread. She'd known there was a good chance she could die. In fact, she'd planned for it. She had closed up enough soft spots so far that even if she didn't survive to fix the rest, it would take several lifetimes for Him to make the kind of progress that she'd made for Him by accident. But the Gate was a gaping, open wound that was growing day by day and could no longer be ignored.

Her throat was on fire from the screams ripping from it. Every part of her burned. But. She. Had. To. Keep. Going.

Mike. Mike. Mike. Mike. Mike. Mike.

Blood ran from her nose, her ear, her eyes.

Her feet left the ground.

When it was finally over, she fell flat on her face, mind and body in agony and muscles paralyzed, but somehow alive. She heard the inhuman shrieks of outrage echoing across the landscape as He realized what had happened. He was coming. And if she didn't move, she would most certainly die here.

She debated it for several moments. At that moment, death did not seem so bad. In fact, it was almost tantalizing. An end to this pain, this hiding and running and surviving.

Mike. Mike. Mike. Mike. Mike. Mike.

She half crawled, half dragged herself along until she came upon a rotting, hollowed tree she'd scouted days earlier, pulled herself inside with great effort, and immediately passing out.

She didn't know how long she slept, but when she woke she knew it had

been a very, very long time. Somehow, during all that time, she'd remained undiscovered. Perhaps because she appeared to be as much a corpse as anything else in this forsaken place.

But one thing was for sure. He knew there was something out there now, a real threat to his plan.

He would be looking for her.

No one could explain it. They had been monitoring the portal carefully since Hopper started there, but no one had approached the enigma unless absolutely necessary. The mission was containment rather than exploration. Without warning, the readings had spiked and their equipment overloaded, sending sparks everywhere. When everything calmed, the Gate was gone. He didn't know what it meant, or why it was happening, but he couldn't help but feel simultaneously relieved and worried. Relieved that the toxic, demon-spawning gateway to hell was now sealed, and worried because it was yet another unknown variable in a series of unknown variables.

Other rifts existed between their world and the Upside Down, which they monitored and assumed were opened by the beast (not quite gates, but *soft spots*). It wasn't until they too began closing up without warning, one by one, that he started to form a theory. The white coats at the lab were all scratching their heads over the mending tears, saying it shouldn't be possible, saying it took a massive amount of energy to open the gates the first time, and it should take a massive amount to close them. By that point, half of a thought had begun to wriggle in the back of his mind.

It was a long shot, but he went with his gut, pulling over to the side of the road on the street those kids dubbed "Mirkwood" in the dead of night, wind whipping his hat and coat, squinting against the dust and debris gusting through the trees. The lab didn't know about this place. He didn't even know if there was a tear here or not, but this is where he'd found Will's bike the night the young boy fled for his life from that inter-dimensional being.

He left empty handed and frustrated that night, not even sure what he was looking for, but decided to give it another shot the next evening. It was raining hard and he was tempted to turn back, but in

the end the rain was the only reason he found what he was looking for. The area felt off, he noticed first, a sort of buzzing energy in the air that made the hair on the back of his neck stand up. As he ventured on, he realized some of the rain wasn't hitting the ground, droplets frozen in place, hovering a foot or so above the ground, defying physics as they levitated there, popping in little explosions against his pants and boots as he trudged through the anomalies.

His heart rate quickened as he moved forward, knowing he was close. A sound like a soft gurgle hit his ears and he paused mid-step, searching for the source with his flashlight. He lowered the beam to find an inexplicable sight. In a way he couldn't describe, the ground was almost transparent, the color remaining the same, but the light piercing through what should be solid matter like ice. And it was dry. The drops, as soon as they hit the grass, disappeared with a nearly inaudible *hiss*.

He marked the trail and came back the next night when the forest was dry but biting cold, clouds ready to burst with the first snow of the year. He placed the shoebox on the ground where the rain had disappeared, observed it a few moments, then turned and began his short journey back.

The next night he held his breath as he crouched down, gloved hands carefully sliding off the lid to find the small, fluffy pink mittens he had placed inside the night before had vanished, and in their place a dirty and ripped scrap of checkered blue fabric, which he identified as a piece of his old, flannel shirt. Holding the shredded material in his hand, afraid to breathe, he let himself fall back so he was sitting like a kid in the dead leaves.

A light feeling had begun to build in his chest as the first snowflakes of winter danced down through the trees. Undeservedly, he was being given a second chance. One that he didn't intend to waste.

The following night he left a plastic tupper filled with food. The next day it was gone, and he found it a few yards away, open and spewed across the ground, small scratches covering the surface. It was then that he decided to install the metal, storage box. The latch didn't lock, but it would keep critters out. Every day he left food and water there, enough, he hoped, to keep her from going hungry.

The policeman saved her life.

His motivations in doing so confused her at first. When she first met the man, she decided he was like Benny. Messy and gruff. But a good man. He protected her and her friends, without asking for anything in return.

But

Somehow, he knew the truth. She got the distinct impression that he could see right through her. Somehow he seemed to realize, without saying a word, what she'd done. She opened the Gate. She was responsible for all the death, for Will's disappearance. His eyes accused her. Her friends didn't understand, but he did. And he was right to blame her.

Which was why she was baffled to discover that he had been the one leaving her food.

But she came to realize that despite his coldness towards her, there was an odd kinship between them. A kind of pain and disillusionment behind his eyes which mirrored her own. He'd seen bad things just like her. He seemed to understand her, more so even than Mike. Perhaps he understood the danger she had caused, and why she must fix it. He was aiding her in completing the task they both knew must be done. He wasn't a bad man, but he saw her for what she was, and she knew because of that she could trust him. Trust him not to tell the bad men. Trust him not to tell Mike.

If she had not found the box, she would have certainly starved by now. She could see every bone in her arms and almost every vein. Her legs shook so badly she could hardly walk. There was nothing edible in this barren place. She didn't want to risk opening portals big enough to slip through and scavenge for food, it was too risky. There was always a chance her doorway might close after her, or worse, something could follow her out.

No, no, no, too risky.

Every once in a while, she could pull something edible through from some of the smaller opening, but it was never enough, especially with all the

power she expended to close the gates. Anything she consumed was burned off almost immediately. The excess of energy she's been using was rarely replenished, and that meant she had to sleep instead, which took much longer. It was almost as difficult to sleep here as it was to find food. She had woken one too many times to the black vines creeping up her body, leeching off her energy as she slept. Everything in this place was a parasite, naturally drawn to any source of energy.

Closing the gates took a lot out of her. The small ones weren't difficult, and most of them were small. Still, the sheer number of tears she repaired each day exhausted her. She had been running out of options, and the box had come just in time. It was in an unmonitored area, so she didn't have trouble accessing it. The Shadow seemed to like to stay in areas that were populated, on the mirror side. And the box was always there, always reliable. Not having to worry about where her next meal came from allowed her to focus on more important things.

Trigger warning for mentions of child abuse.

Hope you guys liked this chapter! It's one of my favorites

4. Welcome to Your Life

Chapter 4: Welcome to Your Life

Hopper never missed a day, but sometimes Eleven did. Or she couldn't access the drop point, he wasn't sure, but in random intervals and for several days at a time the box would go untouched. He didn't know why for sure, but her absences suspiciously coincided with the steadily closing inter-dimensional tears. After about a month, when he had convinced himself that there was no doubt it was the girl and when he had worked up the nerve, he decided it was time.

Her powers had become much stronger. She supposed it was only natural, as she practiced every day. Papa would have been so proud. She didn't need a deprivation tank to find people anymore. If she just closed her eyes and focused, she could slip into the dark place. There, she could find Mike.

She tried not to do it often. She knew she needed to save her energy. The sooner she finished here, the sooner she could see him for real. But sometimes she was weak.

She sat down, cross-legged, beneath a large tree. It was a very tall, very unique tree that she had stumbled across during her many travels. She settled down and closed her eyes, focusing on her breathing.

In. Out. In. Out.

She began to hum softly, the white noise helping her block out the sounds around her. Her stomach swooped and...she opened her eyes to find herself in the Void. A soft voice echoed behind her. She turned slowly, a smile tugging at her lips.

She'd discovered pretty quickly that Mike spoke to her at a specific time each day. It was hard to keep track of time here, but she'd been able to find a kind of rhythm. After the Policeman refilled the box the second time in a day, if she walked from that spot to this tree, Mike would be in the Void. The timing wasn't perfect, and even now, it seemed Mike had been speaking to her for a while already.

Disappointing.

Sometimes he was happy when he spoke to her. Sometimes he was very, very sad. Today, he is angry.

"believe the bad men over their own son, it's such BS! They think it's my fault, that you-you brainwashed me or something, but they're the ones who are being brainwashed!"

His face was bright red as he hunched over his Super-Com in the familiar blanket fort of the Wheeler's basement. The whole picture was the most color she'd seen since the last time she'd visited him.

"They won't listen when I try to tell them the truth. You were protecting us, I know you were! Because you're good, El. You're

good."

She lowered her head in shame. If she were good, there would be no reason for her to be here right now.

He paused for several minutes, his anger slowly fading to wistfulness.

"I miss you, El."

Tears gathered in her eyes. She missed him so much it hurt more than anything that could cause her pain in this place.

"Please, El, just...give me some sort of sign that you're alright. Anything, anything at all. I just need to know you're ok."

He waited for a moment, listening. And just like every other night, she bit the inside of her mouth, hard, and stayed quiet.

He sighed, his whole body slouching. He was used to disappointment by now.

"I feel like...you're just...fading away."

She felt that way too.

"It's like no one knows you, the real you, even though you

saved us all. *You're a hero, but no one even knows.*"

He scoffed and wiped at his eyes.

"But I won't forget, El. I know who you are. And I promise I'll never forget about you."

Please, please forget about me.

"And I'm not going to stop looking for you. Ever."

Please, please don't look for me.

"Even if - even if you never answer me."

A sob choked out of her, so sudden it scared her. She covered her mouth with her hands.

Mike jumped from the feedback and paused to listen again, waiting a long while before he finally gave up, looking despondent.

"I hope you're ok."

He was hurting because of her. But he hoped she was ok.

She was lying on her back, blood oozing down her face and tears leaking out of her eyes. A terrible pain in her chest was keeping her pinned to the ground. She couldn't move, and she vaguely reminded herself that this was exactly why she must not visit Mike any more.

Every time she did, she got that much closer to answering him, of giving the smallest sign if only to relieve his pain a little. But it could not be. If he knew she was here, he would put himself into danger to find her. She didn't want to give him false hope. There was a good chance she may never make it out of here alive. The best thing that could happen was if he forgot about her and moved on with his life. Even if the thought alone made her curl in on herself, wrapping her arms tightly around her legs to try to keep the pain at bay. Otherwise she would just burst apart and leak away into the mire.

He asked her to meet him at a quiet diner just outside of town, one he knew was lucky to have more than two customers at a time and

conveniently housed a sequestered table in the back corner where sound didn't easily carry. He was coolly determined when she walked in, but felt unusually anxious.

She looked confused, but mostly worried, sitting down across from him and immediately messing with her sleeves.

"Hop, what's going on? Your note-" He hadn't dared contact her over the phone. "-something's happened, hasn't it? Are we in danger?"

He caught her wrists, saving her sleeves from being picked to threads and silencing her.

"Joyce. We're not in danger."

She relaxed a tiny bit, but that little furrow between her eyebrows didn't go away. He sighed.

"At least...not yet. Look, I need to tell you something. Something I should have told you before, so please just listen, don't interrupt and...try not to start yelling."

The furrow deepened.

"You remember Eleven?"

Her face fell as she remembered the lost looking little girl who she owed her son's life to, and hadn't even said goodbye to. Joyce had not been able to talk about her since that night at the hospital, when the euphoria of having her child safe was marred by the news of the loss of another. Though she'd only known her for a few hours, Joyce had felt an immediate maternal connection to the little girl. She nodded, her shoulders slouching.

"Of *course* I do."

Hopper drew a breath. "There's more you need to know."

He launched into it, explaining how he'd bargained Eleven's location so they could rescue Will, how the agents had approached him afterwards, how he'd been working with the lab, and everything that he had seen and found there. Her face grew stonier and stonier as he

continued, not leaving a single detail out, no matter how painful. She deserved to know the whole truth, and that was exactly what she was going to get.

Even if it fundamentally changed what she thought of him.

He was waiting for her to say something now, but didn't push it, watching the cogs in her head whirl as she processed everything he'd said.

"You...you let an innocent child die so you could save another?" She was looking at him with wide eyes, simultaneously horrified and disgusted.

He looked down at the mottled table top, brow creasing. "Joyce...you don't understand, I had no ch-"

"Bullshit! Bull. Shit. We could have figured something else out, you could have lied-!"

"No, you don't understand!" He leaned forward, his voice rough but low, trying to keep this from escalating into a yelling match. "Will was *dying*, you saw him! He almost didn't make it!"

She looked like she wanted to argue, her eyes still glittering with indignation, but her lips pressed together, down turned.

"He didn't have a moment to spare! The girl may not have deserved it, but she was the only option we had, Joyce! What would you have had me do? She could at least protect herself and those kids, and they wanted her *alive*. Will was *dying*. I weighed my options, and made a decision."

He rubbed his forehead, closing his eyes against the pain blooming in his temple. "I-I thought I'd put out one fire at a time, you know? I thought there would be time...to help her, later. I didn't know what was going to happen, that that thing would show up, that she'd take it on. I just - I didn't..." He closed his eyes, an unusual wave of self-doubt washing over him. "I didn't see any other way. I had to save him. I didn't know what else to do."

It was one of the most difficult admissions of his life. The guilt of

months washed over him afresh. He was so blinded by his ego, his need to feel depended upon, and his deep seated desire to not feel helpless again, that he had been willing to trade a child's life. It's not what he'd intended, but he'd known the risks. An innocent girl had paid the price for his short comings. He felt so weak.

He felt the light touch of a hand on his wrist and opened his eyes. Joyce was looking at him, her eyes softer. Marginally.

"You made a mistake." She said firmly. "I know you can see that now. I don't know...I-I don't know if I can ever look at you the same, Hop."

He expected as much, and accepted it. Even if she was one of the few people in his life who had cared and depended on him.

"Will is my baby, my little boy. I don't know what I would have done differently, I can't even think about it...but she didn't deserve that. She didn't deserve any of it. In the school...she was so frightened, Hop, her eyes..."

Joyce sighed, her hard expression crumbling into a sorrowful one and she slumped, digging her palms into her eyes, months of accumulated regrets pouring out all at once.

"But she did it anyways. I don't know *why*. She barely knew any of us, but she helped us. And I thought I could pay her back somehow, that I could do something. It's stupid. I thought - I thought I'd take her in."

She smiled a pained smile that was clearly holding back tears. "But then she was gone and I never thanked her. I didn't even say goodbye. I just - she was just a little girl. She was practically a baby. She never even had a chance." Her voice wavered, and somehow this was so much worse than her anger.

Suddenly, he remembered the reason he called her here in the first place. He leaned in and lowered his voice.

"She may still have one."

Joyce jerked up to look at him, eyes damp and incredulous.

"She's alive, Joyce."

He told her everything, feeling guilty as he did. Knowing this put her and her family at risk again, but also realizing that Joyce would want to know.

They spent the rest of the night discussing the safest way to look for her. The lab thought she was dead and had no intention of investigating her disappearance as far as Hopper knew. Under new management, focus had shifted to rapid containment and her case was considered closed. They didn't have any reason to suspect her possible survival or their search, but that didn't mean they shouldn't be on guard. They puzzled out ways to communicate about their activities in case they were being monitored and made plans for scenarios in case one of them found her.

By the end of the night, they were both exhausted, but strangely energized. Joyce turned back to him, arm holding the car door open, her eyes burning with determination as she fixed him with a gaze that left no room for argument.

"You find her. No matter what it takes. You find that little girl and you bring her *home*, Hop."

He wouldn't fail her this time. However, he'd made very little progress on *how* exactly to get her back. The portals were closing, slowly but surely, sewn together by the girl herself in response to what he could only assume was some misplaced guilt and self-inflicted responsibility. It wasn't her fault, any of it, and he wished he could tell her that.

But Hopper also knew she was the only one who could fix the tears that had caused so much harm and had the potential to cause so much more. He understood why she'd made the choices she had.

The problem was, the healing was happening with her on the wrong side. Would she have enough strength to make it back to their side on her own? Or was she sealing herself in, accepting her fate? What kind of toll did patching inter-dimensional schisms leave on her psyche? And on top of that, how was she surviving in that seething, toxic environment for so long? They were questions he couldn't answer, but plagued his mind daily none the less.

The least he could do was try to get her some food and resources, though they didn't always get through. Bigger items, for instance, didn't seem able to translate. Once he left her a pair of winter boots, thick wool socks, pants, and a fluffy, white coat, concerned about the snow that was falling heavier each night (did it snow in the Upside Down? He didn't know, but it was cold and wet no matter the weather, according to the Will). When he returned, only the food and socks were gone.

She always left him something in return. Sometimes it was simple. A collection of pebbles, arranged in the shape of a star. A cracked mug covered in slime and dirt with twigs set neatly inside like flowers in a vase. Sometimes it was more intricate. Tiny, crudely formed figurines made out of twisted vines and what looked like buttons. The gifts never failed to bring a smile to his face and the anticipation he felt each time he approached the box was a lightness he had not experienced in a very long time.

But the gifts were not just a sign of thankfulness for the necessities he left for her. They were so much more than that. There were little assurances. *I'm still here. I'm ok.*

He tried to leave little surprises in addition to the supplies he delivered each night. The small plastic figure of a horse, a package of Pixie Sticks, a picture of the boys he had snagged from an album in Joyce's house one evening while checking in.

Sometimes the gifts he left didn't make it through, but most of the time they did. Once he left a notebook and pen, hoping she would communicate something more, maybe tell him how he could get her out of there. But it was untouched when he returned, either she didn't understand, or she couldn't access it for whatever reason. Maybe she didn't have the words to tell him how to help her. Maybe she had nothing to say to him.

He closed the lid of the box and lit a cigarette, sighing and looking out into the woods, imagining her stepping out from behind a tree. He hoped he was making things even a little bit better for her.

The Shadow being still did not know who she was.

But He had come far too close to figuring it out. It searched for her night and day. She'd used her powers like a cloak to stay just out of sight. But it was getting harder. He had spies everywhere. His control over this land had spread like a plague, taking control of every creature. They roamed the Upside Down at His bidding, searching for her. She progressed further with her plan, but it came with a price as she was forced to proceed to more dangerous ground.

She'd been relieved to find that the breaches had not spread beyond Hawkins. The job was daunting, but not insurmountable. Still, to her, if Hawkins was lost it may very well be the world, as it was all she'd ever known in her short life.

Just a little longer. Just a little longer and she could return home.

She pulled her knees up closer to her chest for some warmth as she held the crumpled photo in both hands, fingers running over the shapes of the boys smiling back at her. When she first found the picture in the box, she'd stared at it and wept for hours straight.

It didn't make her cry anymore. Now it was a goal. She would see them again, and not just on a piece of paper. It steeled her resolve and pushed her forward.

Just a little longer.

I love the idea of Hopper and El, despite all the odds, being able to form this unique father/daughter relationship. And let's face it, that conversation between Joyce and Hopper was something I needed to see and didn't get in Season 2.

5. Welcome Back

Warning: a lot of blood in this chapter.

Chapter 5: Welcome Back

The grimy photo shook in her bloody hands. The bite in her leg from the Shadow's hound-spy was still gushing. It oozed down her leg and into her shoe, making a squish squish squish sound when she was running.

She crouches behind a tree in a hidden part of the forest. At least hidden for now. There are only two portals left in this whole place, her only escape. Both are heavily monitored. But she has no choice. Her time here is up.

He knows she's here. He knows what she looks like. He knows what she's done.

And He's angry.

His mediated exchange with Eleven had gone on the whole winter, and on into March. Towards the end of the month, when the snow began to thaw and the air smelled fresh and alive again, when spring raised its sleepy head and blinked at the blue skies and sunlight, he trudged through the slushy snow and tufts of new, green grass towards the little box in the woods as he did every morning and every evening, a faint smile betraying him as he wondered what treasures he might find this time.

When he opened the lid, the smile dropped, replaced with a confused frown.

A pile of fresh pink coneflowers scattered the bottom of the box. He glanced around the woods, but didn't see that type of flower anywhere in the area. He had to assume someone else put them in the box, knowing nothing like that stayed alive in the Upside Down (and yes, that thought made him worry every day about how she was surviving in that hellish nightmare-scape). He dumped the flowers out, but couldn't stop himself from pocketing one.

The same night, when he opened the box, he found the food he had placed inside untouched. It wasn't like it hadn't happened before, in random intervals she didn't touch the box for days at a time. But the strange flowers from earlier made him uneasy. Forcing himself not to panic, he replaced the food.

He made his way back the next day, a nervous feeling pulling at him as he approached the dropbox. Icy dread filled his chest with cold shards as he discovered it untouched just like the day prior.

Putting all his senses on full alert, he realized the atmosphere had shifted as well. Usually when he came to this spot, the air was abuzz with unharnessed energy. Now everything was quiet and still. Had this softspot closed like all the others? Had Eleven closed it? And what did that mean for her? He was unsure what to do but knew this was not a good sign. Something had changed, and he felt like he was racing against the clock with no idea which way he was meant to run.

On the third day nothing had changed and he was on the verge of a nervous breakdown. Lost in thought on the drive home, he didn't notice the gas light turn on. Brought out of his reverie by his car not responding to the pedal, he cursed and pulled over to the side of the road as his car cruised to a stop. It was about a 3 mile walk to the nearest gas station, so he wasted no time beginning his trek north, hoping to hitch a ride with a passing car before he had to exercise too much.

He'd walked a good mile and was absently admiring the pinkish-purple flowers that had exploded across the green hillsides of the clearing up ahead when he stopped in his tracks. Something clicked into place in his brain, and he diverted his path, stepping off the blacktop and onto grass, heading towards the sloping hills, not at all sure where he was heading or why but his gut pushed him onward.

He'd been walking less than 10 minutes through the sea of flowers when he found her.

Lying on her back with arms outstretched, dress splayed out around her legs, and a cropped halo of curls surrounding her head. Surrounded by hundreds of pink petals, she looked like some sort of

fallen angel. The image was so striking that he just stood there for a few seconds, unable to move.

Her skin was shockingly white against the colorful backdrop, and dried blood covered the whole lower half of her face, running over her chin and down her neck, seeping into the collar of her faded, filthy dress. There was more covering her ears, standing out stark against her pale skin, streaks traveled down like tear tracks from her closed eyes. More was pooled under her head and splattered on the surrounding flowers. There was also a nasty looking gash in her calf that looked like it was from some sort of animal. The blood looked old and he thought she was dead for sure and she was so still and he was too late and everything he'd done had been in vain and what was he going to tell *Joyce*?

He stooped beside her unmoving figure, panic closing cold around his chest as his fingers hesitated before pushing into her jugular for a pulse. The breath rushed out of his lungs when he found it there, if only weakly, and he saw the faint rise and fall of her chest, and he was picking her up and she was so light and so small and so thin and so breakable and *why* didn't he leave more food for her?

He held her like a porcelain doll as he walked, careful not to jostle her because he was afraid she'd break, just out of the view of the road. He carried her the entire 5 mile walk to *Joyce's* house, checking her shallow breathing every couple of minutes and talking to her the whole way, mostly for his own benefit because she was just so *still*, unnaturally still.

I'm sorry, I'm sorry, I am so sorry.

When the flurry of the next several hours passed and they were finally in a safe place and she was under at least 15 blankets, he sat by the cot they'd set up for her in silent vigil, not sleeping and barely eating.

It was very odd, sitting there next to the person his life had, indirectly, revolved around for the last several months. He felt like he knew her intimately, despite never having a full conversation or even seeing her face for more than a few brief hours. He'd waited so long to talk to this little girl in the flesh, to say all the things that had been

building up inside of him during the course of their acquaintance. He couldn't help the words that poured out, despite the fact he knew she probably couldn't hear them.

"I'm sorry, kid. I'm sorry for a lot of things and I hope someday I can make it up to you. And I'm going to tell you again when you wake up, too. But you have a home here, if you want it. You've earned it. You earned it a long time ago. You've fought long and hard. I'm going to make it so you don't have to fight anymore, you got that? I'm going to take care of you. But I want you to know that what you did...it was good. You did good, kid. You did so good."

And when she did wake up, a day later in his grandfather's cabin, she was hardly strong enough to lift her head off the pillow, and yet the first thing she tried to do was give him back the threadbare mittens he'd gifted her, as if she'd come all that way just to return what he'd loaned her those months earlier. And that was the moment he knew this kid wasn't going out of his life any time soon.

And she didn't.

I like this ending. I know it's short and it may not be as detailed as some folks may want, as far as El's return, her rescue, her recovery, and her developing relationship with Hopper, but I didn't really want it to be. That feels like subject matter for a separate fic.

I hope you had fun reading this, I LOVED writing it.